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ABSTRACT

This report examines how New York counties can systematically and programmatically improve approaches to managing persons in need of supervision (PINS), describing approaches to truancy prevention and diversion that have been instituted nationwide and may be applicable to the PINS operating system. Researchers surveyed truancy-specific programs nationwide and identified three categories: early prevention programs, typically at the elementary level; programs to help truant students who would otherwise be referred by their schools to family court as status offenders (or PINS); and programs that address truant students against whom status offender petitions have already been filed and who are at risk of detention and placement. Within each category, the report highlights programs illustrating effective approaches to addressing the problem of chronic truancy and includes information on financing and outcomes when available. All of the programs share three critical themes: approaching truancy prevention in a collaborative, multi-agency fashion; integrating the common expectation that schools take action in the first instance to identify patterns of absence, notify parents of the pattern, or attempt some school-based solutions before referring the child to the juvenile justice system; and assuming that truancy is a symptom of more significant familial or emotional problems and seeking to identify and address the environmental factors underlying the truancy. Contact information for the programs described in the study is included. (Contains 20 footnotes.) (SM)

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APPROACHES TO TRUANCY PREVENTION

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October 2002

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Introduction

The Vera Institute of Justice's National Associates Program on Youth Justice (YJP) supports public officials who are engaged in reforms related to juvenile justice and child welfare. The program facilitates a collaborative approach to the reform process and the development of solutions that are not only cost-effective but also have the potential to produce better outcomes for youth.

YJP is currently working in New York State. Prompted by a change in legislation raising the age limit of status offenders ("persons in need of supervision" or "PINS") from 16 to 18, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services contracted with YJP to help county and state officials prepare for the predicted rise in PINS cases. That work began over this past year and will continue through 2003, with a focus on improving court diversion programs and developing alternatives to putting these children in non-secure detention and out-of-home placements.

As part of the Program's assistance to New York State, I am happy to introduce the first in a series of YJP publications: *Approaches to Truancy Prevention.* Our goal is to focus on issues that will help New York counties systematically and programmatically improve approaches to managing their PINS populations. Here we have described varying approaches to truancy prevention and diversion that have been instituted across the country, and that may be applicable or adaptable to the PINS system operating in your county.

To learn more about YJP and how we can assist reform in your jurisdiction, visit our web site at www.vera.org/youthjustice, or contact me at (212) 376-3032 or hsegal@vera.org.

Heidi Segal
Director, Youth Justice Program

Truancy: A National and Local Problem

Every day, hundreds of thousands of youth are absent from school without an excuse.[1] In September 2002, at least one-fifth of enrolled students missed roll call during the first few weeks of class in almost half of New York City's high schools.[2] Many states, including New York, are motivated to improve school attendance rates based on their commitment to the belief that education provides real opportunities and produces better outcomes for children. States are also dedicated to combating truancy due to concerns regarding public safety. Indeed, truancy is widely believed to be a predictor of delinquent behavior: studies document that between 75 and 85 percent of serious juvenile offenders have been truant or chronically absent from school.[3] Other studies indicate that dropouts are three and a half times as likely as high school graduates to be convicted of a crime.[4] With the stakes so high, states struggle to formulate comprehensive strategies that both provide for early intervention and truancy prevention and implement effective, targeted responses to chronic truancy.

In New York State, truant students are regularly referred by schools to probation departments as status offenders or persons in need of supervision (PINS). It is not uncommon for this referral to be the first attempt to address the youth's truant behavior. With few exceptions, schools are not required to attempt preliminary counseling or other forms of intervention before referring a truant to the PINS system.[5] Although attempts may be made to adjust truant behavior through PINS diversion programs, these efforts are often unsuccessful and result in referrals to family court for PINS petitions. Once in the court system, truant PINS often violate court-ordered conditions of probation by continuing to refuse to attend school. In the absence of alternative systemic responses and compelled to preserve judicial authority and credibility, frustrated judges regularly remand truant PINS to non-secure detention while the case is pending and to foster care placements upon adjudication.

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[1] See, e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School*. (Washington, DC: OJJDP, 2001).

[2] Reported by NY1, September 30, 2002.

[3] Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, *Overview of Truancy*. (Denver: Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2001).

[4] David E. Gullatt, Ph.D. and Dwayne A. Lemoine, "The School Truancy Dilemma," (1997) (ERIC Document Reproduction Services Number ED409652 (citations omitted), 8.

[5] Approximately ten years ago, the Erie County Probation Department, in conjunction with the school system and department of mental health, instituted a county-wide protocol restricting the cases in which schools may file PINS petitions based on truancy allegations. Before any school in Erie County can refer a truancy case to PINS diversion, the protocol mandates that the student has at least fifteen illegal absences and that the school attempts to intervene through parent conferences, home visits, referrals to counseling or social service agencies, superintendent's hearings or in other ways. Pursuant to the protocol, school referrals are not typically accepted by the probation department after April 15 of the school year in which the truancies occurred.

Attempting to address a child's failure to attend school by removing a child from his or her school is not only ironic but has time and again proven to be ineffective.[6] According to a study released by the Vera Institute of Justice in 2001, PINS youth placed in foster care have much worse attendance after entry than they did before they were placed.[7] As studies confirm that truancy is typically symptomatic of broad underlying factors, such as family problems, school environment, special education needs, economic status, and mental health concerns, truants referred directly to the court system rarely receive the support or services they require.[8] Moreover, as large numbers of truants are remanded to non-secure detention or placed in foster care—the most expensive components of the PINS system—the costs of the PINS system are escalating to unmanageable levels. The predicted influx of new cases resulting from the change in legislation will likely exacerbate this problem.

In an effort to identify effective approaches to truancy prevention, the Youth Justice Program conducted a survey of truancy-specific programs operating across the country and identified three categories: (1) early prevention programs, typically established at the elementary school level; (2) programs designed to assist truant students that would otherwise be referred by their schools to family court as status offenders (or PINS); and (3) programs designed to address truant students against whom status offender (or PINS) petitions have already been filed and who are at risk of detention and placement. Each of these approaches to truancy prevention is described below. Within each category, we have highlighted particular programs illustrating effective and practical approaches to addressing the problem of chronic truancy that may be adaptable in New York State.[9] In addition to describing the programmatic structure, we have included information relating to financing and outcomes where such data was available.[10]

Despite the categorical and geographic distinctions, the programs featured in this paper share three critical themes. First, all of these programs approach truancy prevention in a collaborative, multi-agency fashion. Jurisdictions taking a coordinated approach to truancy not only yield financially tenable outcomes, but also achieve better social

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[6] *See, e.g.*, Michael William R. Stott, "Juvenile Court Processing of Delinquent, Ungovernable and School Truant Adolescents: The Effect on School Attendance," (dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, September 1987), 72-73.

[7] Dylan Conger and Alison Rebeck, *How Children's Foster Care Experiences Affect Their Education*, (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2001), p. 31.

[8] See, e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School*. (Washington, DC: OJJDP, 2001). See also Office of the Ramsey County Attorney, *Truancy Intervention Program Year End Report* (2000-2001), 6 (reporting that 78 percent of students within TIP in 2000-2001 displayed significant personal or family issues that impacted school attendance).

[9] The Vera Institute does not endorse one program or approach over any other. Moreover, while this paper presents a sample of some of the successful approaches and programs operating nationwide, it does not constitute a comprehensive summary of all available approaches and programs.

[10] We have intentionally excluded specific cost estimates because such figures will vary greatly across localities.

outcomes for troubled youth.[11] Second, all of the programs highlighted in this paper integrate the common expectation that schools take action in the first instance to identify patterns of absence, notify parents of the pattern, or attempt some school-based solutions before referring the child to the juvenile justice system. Finally, the programs across all three categories are built around the assumption that truancy is a symptom of more significant familial or emotional problems and seek to identify and address the environmental factors underlying the pattern of truancy. As such, all of the programs aim to keep youth in school by providing services and support systems and, in turn, minimize the jurisdiction's reliance on the juvenile justice system to manage this challenging population.

APPROACH #1: Prevention and Early Intervention (Pre-PINS)

Early prevention programs focus on elementary school students and aim to uncover and address the issues underlying the truancy pattern to remedy the problem at its incipiency. Early intervention programs also seek to educate parents and children about the importance of continued education and instill enduring educational values. Each of the programs highlighted here shares the perception that parents are responsible for a young child's failure to regularly attend school. Accordingly, sanctions associated with an elementary aged child's failure to comply with compulsory attendance laws and early prevention programs are directed toward the parents in the form of fines and/or misdemeanor prosecutions.

Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program (Ohio)

In the Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program in Ohio, the emphasis is on elementary and middle schools.[12] Each county and school district administers the program in a manner that best suits its local needs and concerns; however, in order to take advantage of free training and materials and some funding support, each local program must adhere to core values of neutral mediation. The mediation sessions are confidential. The goal is to create a voluntary agreement reached by all parties, rather than engage in a disciplinary or fault-finding session.

In some of the stronger programs in Ohio, on the first day of school every student takes home a letter informing parents that the school takes the issue of attendance seriously. After two or three absences, the school sends another letter to parents indicating the number of days missed and informing the parents that the school is

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[11] *See* Barbara Crenshaw, "A Collaborative Approach to Dealing with High School Truancy," *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin 65, Issue* 2 (1999): 33-36; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, *Overview of Truancy*. (Denver: Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2001).

[12] While the program can operate in high schools, it has primarily targeted the elementary and middle school populations, where it and has been very effective, especially in grades K through 6.

monitoring the problem. If absences continue to accumulate and reach the trigger point (designated at the community level), the school invites the parents to participate in a mediation session. The invitation letter is, in some cases, written on court stationary but is signed by the schools.

At the mediation session, the mediator meets with the parent and school representatives (preferably the student's teacher) at the school. The student is not invited to the mediation if he or she is below the sixth grade; it is the belief that at such a young age attendance problems are the result of family difficulties rather than the student's deliberate choice. Other mediation attendees may include: a truancy officer, the school principal, school social worker, or a representative from the department of social services. Participants discuss what underlies the pattern of truancy and a mediation agreement, if one is reached, is drawn to guide the prevention strategy going forward. The mediator assures that the parent is an equal partner in designing the prevention strategy.

If the mediation agreement is subsequently violated, the school may opt to bring the family back for a second mediation session. Alternatively, the case may be referred to court for a higher level of intervention. A court referral may result in the imposition of a fine or jail time for the truant's parent. Counties in which the program has been most successful have implemented a fast-track system, whereby families that violate the mediation agreement are scheduled for an initial court date within a month. Without a fast-track agreement between the school and court, programs may not be as successful.

During the 2000-2001 school year, 1,700 mediation sessions were held in 58 elementary and middle schools in Ohio. "In each of the counties, a significant reduction in the number of absences and tardies was demonstrated for those students/families that participated in the program."[13] For example, for kindergarten students participating in the program, the average number of absences fell from 15 to 4 after mediation; for first graders, the average number of absences fell from 13 to 2 after mediation.[14] Due to its success to date, the program is being expanded to between 170 and 200 schools this year.

The program is administered by the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management, in collaboration with the Ohio Supreme Court's Office of Dispute Resolution. The operating cost of the program is small as compared to the cost of the more traditional court response. The primary costs are the employment of mediators (although in some situations they are volunteers) and the daily fee for substitute teachers to cover regular class sessions while the truant's teacher attends mediations. A program coordinator manages the logistics of the program including hiring and training mediators,

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[13] Luminesce Consulting, *Evaluation Of The Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program Final Report* (July 2002).

[14] See ibid. for a complete analysis of the change in the average number of absences and tardies before and after mediation.

scheduling mediation sessions, and facilitating communication between the schools and the courts.

Broward Truancy Intervention Program (Broward County, FL)

With 250,000 students, Broward County, Florida, is home to the fifth largest school district in the country. To address its growing truancy problem, the Broward Truancy Intervention Program (BTIP) was established in 1997 as a partnership between the state attorney's office and the Broward County School Board to keep elementary school children in school and out of court through a progressive series of interventions.

After three unexcused absences, a centralized computer system at the school board generates a letter to parents notifying them of the emerging attendance problem. The letter is from the school and is signed, electronically, by the principal.

After five unexcused absences, a second computer generated letter is sent via certified mail. Simultaneously, the state attorney's office is sent a list of the students to which the certified letter was distributed. The state attorney's office issues a subpoena to the school board seeking more detailed personal information on each of these students, including the student's address and number of absences to date. Such information is downloaded from a central database and transferred to the state attorney's office within 10 days.

After 10 unexcused absences, a "student services coordinator" arranges a meeting between the assistant state attorney assigned to the truancy unit, the parents, a school social worker, and a representative from the school (preferably the principal or vice principal) at a local police department. The child is not required to attend the conference. Through the conference, the parent is informed of the consequences of continued truancy, the group explores possible causes, and the child and family may be referred to services though the community or the school.

If a parent does not come to the conference or the attendance problem continues thereafter, misdemeanor charges may be brought against the parent (sanctions are not directed against the child). Notably, only 160 filings have been made over the past three years, despite the thousands of cases that have gone through the program.

BTIP is funded by the Florida Department of Education's Safe and Drug Free Schools.[15] The program is staffed by the sole prosecutor from the state attorney's truancy division; six retired police officers, who are responsible for conducting investigations; and one secretary.

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[15] Craig C. Jackson, *Broward Truancy Intervention Program (BTIP) Status Report (2000)*, i.

APPROACH #2: Alternatives to Filing a PINS Petition—Diversion from Family Court

The following programs offer schools and county agencies an alternative to referring truant students directly to the PINS system; they could also be adopted in New York State as truancy-specific PINS diversion programs. These programs, which are commonly implemented at the middle and high school levels, strive to intervene at the emerging stages of the truancy problem—the point at which social service programs, education, and support can be most effective. Consistent with the philosophy that truancy is most often the result of complicated underlying emotional, familial, and environmental factors, rather than the willful behavior of the child, these programs shift the initial onus for addressing truancy problems away from the probation department and the PINS system and toward the schools themselves. Most of the programs falling under this category employ a continuum of interventions to address the truancy problem as it develops over time. Across the intervention continuum, these programs utilize an interagency approach to minimize the possibility of court intervention.

Truancy Intervention Program (Ramsey County, MN)

The Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) was initiated in 1995 by the Ramsey County Attorney in St. Paul, Minnesota, to address truancy among students between the ages of 12 and 16. The program has since expanded to address attendance problems of children age six through 18. TIP is structured across three levels of progressively intrusive interventions.[16] First, for students with three or more absences, the school can refer the student and family to a large group informational meeting at the school. The purpose of the meeting is to provide information about compulsory attendance laws, the nature of the TIP program, and the legal consequences of chronic truancy.

Students failing to improve their attendance after the school meeting are referred to the School Attendance Review Team (SART). At the SART hearing, school representatives (which may include a school social worker or counselor), the assistant county attorney, parents, and students collaborate to design an attendance contract. Based on the nature of the problem, referrals to social service agencies and counseling may be included as terms of the attendance contract. If attendance still does not improve, the third step in the TIP continuum is the filing of a truancy petition in juvenile court.

According to the Truancy Intervention Program's 2000-2001 Year End Report, the program has been highly successful combating the problem of truancy without involving the juvenile court system. Indeed, the number of truancy petitions filed in juvenile court in Ramsey County has fallen by 47 percent since the inception of TIP in 1994. In the

[16] TIP in Ramsey County is modeled after the Abolish Chronic Truancy Program (ACT), established in Los Angeles, California in 1993. For more information on ACT, *see* Mitchell Landsberg, "D.A. Defends Crime Prevention Efforts," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 April 2000, sec. B, p. 1.

2000-2001 school year, it is estimated that 82 percent of students improved attendance as a result of TIP. The number of students missing 15 days or more of school decreased from 73 percent to 42 percent in grades nine through 12. During 2000-2001, 2,192 students were referred to TIP. Of these, only 668 received SART hearings, and an even smaller number (309) were referred to juvenile court.

Given the success of TIP for older students, the Family Truancy Intervention Program (FTIP) was established in January 1999 to address chronic absenteeism among elementary students. Although FTIP is essentially structured in the same manner as TIP, there are a few important distinctions. For example, a referral to a SART hearing produces a report of maltreatment to the Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD). Consequently, a RCCHSD child protection worker completes an assessment with the family prior to the SART hearing and attends the hearing along with a school representative, the assistant county attorney, and the parents. After the contract is drawn, both school staff *and* the child protection worker monitor parent's compliance with the contract.

Truancy Intervention Program (Fremont County, CA)

The Truancy Intervention Program (TIP), based in Fremont County, California, is a collaboration between the department of human services, the police department, and the school district to decrease truancy. TIP is loosely modeled after truancy centers that have been established in many locations across the country. Generally speaking, truancy centers are partnerships between schools and police designed to retrieve students from the street during school hours and bring them to a centralized location where they can be reunited with family, offered an assessment, and linked with services.[17]

TIP takes the truancy center concept a step further and incorporates a strong counseling component. The Youth and Family Services Office (YFS), a counseling agency under the supervision of the department of human services, houses and manages TIP. Generally, TIP receives truancy referrals from the police. When the school identifies a pattern of absences, it notifies its assigned school resource officers (SROs). An SRO then visits the family's home and brings the child to the clinic. Police on regular patrol can also pick up students who are at large in the community during school hours and bring them to the clinic.[18]

At the clinic, the officer or SRO fills out an arrest report and the parents are contacted. While students wait for their parents, counselors (licensed marriage and family therapists or clinical psychologists) talk to the children to try to determine the causes

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[17] *See, e.g.*, www.jaxtruancy.com for a description of a truancy center program operated out of Jacksonville, Florida; and the Joint Legislative Audit Bureau Report, *A Best Practices Review: Truancy Reduction Efforts*, 2000, for an evaluation of the Truancy Abatement Centers operated in Wisconsin.

[18] As more and more families have become aware of the TIP program in Fremont County, parents have started to bring their children to the clinic on a voluntary basis.

underlying the truant behavior. When the parents arrive, there is an intervention and assessment session. Parents are informed of the truancy laws, and the counselor leads a discussion exploring some of the underlying issues. Half of the students admitted to TIP are immediately enrolled in counseling (and receive four no-fee subsequent visits to the clinic, a total of five sessions). Some come back for a follow-up session if a more lengthy assessment is required. Based on the assessment, a verbal contract is made articulating a strategy for truancy prevention going forward. During the contract period, counselors communicate regularly with the school to monitor the student's progress.

If there is no progress (i.e., the family is not cooperating with the contract or the problem is worsening), the TIP clinic notifies the school district of the unsuccessful intervention. The school district may then refer the case to the district attorney.

TIP was established in 1999 through the use of TANF funding. It is now funded through a grant from probation designated for the status offender population and some additional funding through the city budget. Counselors at YFS do not work exclusively on the TIP program but share their time across other counseling programs offered by the clinic to the community at large.

Court Unified Truancy Suppression Program (Phoenix, AZ)

The Court Unified Truancy Suppression Program (CUTS), operating out of Maricopa County, Arizona, is administered by the division of community services under the direction of the Maricopa County Juvenile Probation Department. CUTS is designed to work with truant youth through community-based interventions rather than referring them to juvenile court as status offenders.

Once probation considers a school to be eligible for the program, a CUTS officer (one of nine probation officers exclusively dedicated to the program) is assigned to the school. All parents are then sent a uniform introductory letter informing them about the implementation of the CUTS program.

Under the CUTS protocol, if a child incurs three unexcused absences, the school sends a warning letter to the parents and convenes a meeting to attempt to identify the source of the truancy problem. If the pattern of absences continues after the school intervention, the school issues a truancy citation. The citation sets an initial hearing date to take place within two weeks of its issuance.

The hearing is conducted by the CUTS officer on school premises—it is not judicial in nature but is rather a diversion hearing. In addition to the CUTS officer, school personnel (e.g., an administrator or counselor), the child, and the parents attend the hearing. Based on the hearing, members of the family are linked to services—such as counseling, education classes, and substance abuse treatment—in accordance with the specific needs presented.

In addition to the service component, children will be assigned "consequences" that must be completed within 30 to 60 days of the hearing. Consequences are designed to

hold the child and parent accountable for the truancy and can include tutoring sessions, work hours, writing an essay, or attending a class.

If the child fails to complete the assigned consequences or if the child or family fails to comply with the service component of the program, the case may be referred to court. Alternatively, if the probation officer finds that the non-compliant behavior does not warrant court intervention, the case may be closed with the potential to be reopened if the child is subsequently referred to the program. Additionally, if the student is old enough, his or her driver's license may be suspended.

The CUTS program has proven to be highly successful at addressing the issues underlying truant behavior and diverting cases away from juvenile court. In the year 2000, 74 percent of the students participating in CUTS completed their assigned consequences and improved their attendance during the program period. School administrators found that 97 percent of students regularly attended school after enrollment in the program and that four-year graduation rates increased by 14 percent. Probation officers estimate that less than five percent of CUTS cases were ultimately referred to the juvenile court. Notably, the number of drug offenses generally declined in schools in which the CUTS program was operating and was significantly lower than the number of drug offenses reported in schools that did not host the CUTS program.

APPROACH #3: After a PINS Petition Has Been Filed—Alternative Court Sanctions

In New York, truants are at high risk of detention and placement due to their likely failure to comply with judges' orders to attend school. Judges complain that there is a dearth of programmatic alternatives available to them for this challenging population. The following programs represent coordinated efforts among county agencies to provide family court judges with meaningful alternatives to detention and out-of-home placement for truants. These programs are designed specifically for the truancy cases on the family court docket and are considered by judges to be more effective than standard court sanctions. The program administrators, generally probation officers and truancy case managers, develop expertise by working exclusively with truancy cases. These programs enable family courts to move away from a "one size fits all" approach to adjudicating and managing status offender cases and toward an approach that targets the special education and other needs of the truant child.

Fulton County Truancy Intervention Project (Atlanta, GA)

Operating in Atlanta since 1991, the Truancy Intervention Project (TIP) of the Atlanta Bar Foundation serves children who are chronically absent from school. TIP provides volunteer mentors (generally attorneys offering pro bono legal services) to children who have been referred to the juvenile court system due to excessive absences

from school. The Atlanta law firm of Alston & Bird donated $175,000 in 1993 to establish Kids In Need of Dreams (KIND), a non-profit organization that coordinates the efforts of TIP by recruiting, training, and deploying volunteer mentors.

TIP operates as a drop-out prevention program for children in both the Atlanta and Fulton County public school systems. When school-based interventions do not remedy an emerging truancy problem, the school social worker files a truancy petition with court. The court immediately assigns the case to a TIP probation officer (six probation officers are exclusively assigned to truancy and educational neglect cases). The probation officer calendars the case and sends the child's information and case file to KIND. KIND then locates an attorney/mentor willing to take the case out of the extensive database compiled for that purpose.

A volunteer attorney is assigned to be the child's lawyer in truancy petitions. Three to four weeks prior to the initial court date, the TIP volunteer contacts the family and tries to establish a connection with the child. At the initial hearing, if the child is adjudicated truant, the judge places the child under the supervision of the court and imposes conditions that can include counseling, education programs, and regular school attendance. The TIP attorney/mentor then continues to play a supervisory and support role in collaboration with the TIP probation officer assigned to the case. Attorneys earn Continuing Legal Education (CLE) credit for attending the required TIP training seminar. More than 850 trained volunteers have given their time and skills to participate in TIP.[19]

The support of the one judge who hears all truancy cases has been critical to TIP's success. For the past two years of the program, TIP has handled 100 percent of the truancy cases filed in the Fulton County Juvenile Court. Evaluations report that TIP boasts a 70 percent success rate of keeping would-be dropouts in school. Since 1992, nearly 2,000 children have been placed in the project and 75 percent have not had subsequent contacts with the court system.

Seventeenth Judicial District Truancy Reduction Project (Adams County, CO)

The Seventeenth Judicial District Truancy Reduction Project in Colorado strives to address the issues underlying the pattern of truancy and reduce the overall number of truancy petitions that are referred to court. Under the program, schools are required to identify truants and attempt to use internal measures and individual counseling to promote attendance. Once the school-based measures have been exhausted, the school files a truancy petition with the court. The court then immediately refers the case to the

[19] A program based in Douglas County, Kansas, offers truants a similar diversion program. Instead of attorneys, the volunteers supporting the Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program in Douglas County are primarily undergraduate students from the University of Kansas.

truancy case manager (TCM), who will give the family the option of participating in the Truancy Reduction Project; if the family declines, the case is sent back to court.[20]

If the family decides to work with the TCM, the TCM interviews the child and family and designs a family treatment plan incorporating input from the family, service agencies and the school. The initial meeting takes place at the child's school so that the TCM can immediately access teachers and school staff who are familiar with the child and the family. In addition to requiring regular school attendance, conditions of the family treatment plan can include counseling, community service, and urine analysis; conditions may be imposed not only on the truant child but also on other members of the family where appropriate. The TCM monitors the case, typically for a period of 12 weeks, to ensure the truant behavior is reduced.

If the truancy behavior is abated, the TCM files a memorandum of accomplishment with the referring school district and the parent. The child and family are then invited to an award ceremony at the courthouse and the truancy petition is dismissed. Approximately 85 percent of youth and families successfully complete the program. Families who refuse or fail to meet with the TCM or are unable to comply with the case plan after several modifications, are referred to the magistrate judge (approximately 15 percent). Because these cases tend to be the most extreme, the magistrate judge may place the child out of the home or sentence the parents to jail for contempt.

The TCM is a court employee, maintains an office in the courthouse, and is paid from grant funds. Over the school year, the TCM sees anywhere between 70 and 115 students. She deals exclusively with truancy cases and, as such, has developed an expertise in providing solutions for this population. Last year, the program received a Judicial Conference Award recognizing its success with this challenging population. The program is now entering its fourth year of operation.

Conclusion

There are a variety of programs operating across the country that are successfully meeting the needs of truants without relying on out-of-home detention and placement—sanctions that have proven to be ineffective for this population. Early intervention programs address youth at the elementary school level and work with parents to identify and rectify the problems underlying truant behavior before the child is in danger of involvement with the juvenile justice system. Other programs are utilized as alternatives to filing PINS petitions and are geared toward older truant youth that might otherwise be referred to the family court by their schools. These programs work quickly to educate parents and students about the significance of truancy and offer a continuum of increasingly intensive levels of intervention to prevent chronic truancy and divert

[20] In Colorado, children over the age of 15 are not referred to the TCM, but rather go directly before the magistrate judge.

potential PINS youth away from court. Finally, some programs offer judges alternatives to non-secure detention and placement after a truancy petition has been filed. Some of these programs rely on the help of volunteer community mentors to provide an effective substitute for non-secure detention and placement; others rely on truancy case managers exclusively devoted to these cases. In the end, the programs featured in this paper—within all three categories—share three common philosophies. These programs expect schools to attempt school-based interventions in the first instance and to participate in any collaborative intervention prior to referring cases to the juvenile justice system. These programs also seek to therapeutically address the environmental factors underlying the truant behavior. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, these programs take a collaborative approach to the issue of truancy and work cooperatively across agencies and with families to address the source of the truant behavior. By integrating these fundamental philosophies, these programs offer responses to truancy that are not only more cost effective than strict reliance on the juvenile justice system but also produce appreciably better outcomes for troubled youth.

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Truancy Intervention Program
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Court Unified Truancy Suppression Program
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